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Travels with Harold: Cluelessness and Cageyness in the Teaching of Social Foundations

Miller's (2010) call to nostalgia helps us see what that experience really is. Nostalgia is remembering a time when the future has not happened yet, but is anticipated with certainty, confidence, and contentment. We can only experience nostalgia when we are already in that future, and it did not work out the way we had planned. If things do unfold as intended, there is no nostalgia, only memory, recall of developing the scheme we have executed. The emotional valance of nostalgia stems from the air that has been let into a closed line through the slip between intention and outcome. It is that air that lets experience breathe into a full, complex thing.

This paper came out of reading and curriculum preparation I began last spring, when I accepted a position as assistant professor in a college of education after nearly a decade of staff and faculty positions in a curriculum development non-profit and a huge state medical school. I spent the next months stretched between nostalgia for our field's past and the laying of plans for the future I intended to manifest in my new gig. For the first I read Harold Rugg, one of my favorite curriculum dreamers, especially Evan's (2007) account of his social studies curriculum running afoul of the patriotic sentiments of the 1930s. For the second, I read Taubman's (2009) working-through of his experience in the audit culture of the teacher education institution I was now affiliating with completely. Between these two nostalgic records I worked out my own plans, attentive always to what shall I teach and what effect I intended for my students, especially in the outcome category we like to call "dispositions." I was mindful of Grumet's (2010) observation that "the sweep of these [foundations] discourses overwhelms our students"

without offering them a "realistic appraisal of the issues in teaching today" and "suggestions of how to address them" (p. 68). What would I teach, and how? What preparations could I offer that gave students both understanding and a way to know what to do next?

This is the experience I lay out here: my efforts to incorporate two nostalgias into the intentions that would frame my own action and eventual remembering as a foundations teacher. My alliterative tendencies led me to characterize Rugg's contributions to my work as illuminating "cluelessness," and Taubman's as revealing "complicity." In this paper, I'll draw on my time with the doctors to describe the culture of teaching I believe our students are entering. Then I will explain how Rugg and Taubman's accounts came to merit my reductive tags. In conclusion, I will describe the intentional stance I have developed in my curriculum work and the disposition it seeks to nurture in my students, which I'll call "cageyness" for reasons I hope to make clear.

The role of teacher as "professional"

The characterization of our field as a profession has become hegemonic. I have been in this work just long enough to track "professionalism's" historical arc in our field, through its ascension to its current status as sanctioned term-of-art among policy makers. Just as it seems *Waiting for Superman* has swept away decades of debate on charter schools to render it the "one best system" to meet students' needs, so has the work of Linda Darling-Hammond, the Carnegie Center for the Advancement of Teaching, and other thought leaders who have the ear of policy makers established the professionalization of our field as our common-sense *ne plus ultra*. "Professionalism" is now a word without a navel.

I understand education's definition of the term as imported almost whole-cloth from the world of medicine. My previous position – teaching social foundations to pre-service doctors –

gave me opportunity to explore how the "profession" of medicine came to its monolithic existence through careful boundary maintenance between allopathic practitioners and everyone else. This year's centennial celebration of the Flexner Report has generated little heat - but considerable light - among scholars of medical education, some of whom have re-opened the question of what was lost when that report pronounced the majority of the period's medical schools inadequate and unscientific when compared to the 2 / 2 curriculum of Johns Hopkins. The subsequent rush to embrace scientism in the four-year undergrad medical curriculum surely eliminated some institutions that were causing harm, but it also shut down the larger part of a thriving culture of black medical schools, which could not be funded at levels needed to maintain the laboratory and classroom offerings of Hopkins (Steinecke & Terrell, 2010). That loss decimated a caregiver population whose absence affected that community's health of the next century.

But the impact of that boundary work is even broader. Allopathic medicine has worked hard to systematically exclude midwives, osteopaths, hydropaths, and others who brought alternate framings of disease and wellness to health care practice, re-incorporating them on their own terms only when they could be made profitable adjuncts to their own goals (Petrina, 2008). Professionals spend enormous energy being sure the rest of us know who they are *not*. They affirm the arcanity of their knowledge in order to secure their sole right to self-judgment. The autonomy and increased esteem that accrue to those who draw the lines are two of the benefits promised to teachers in exchange for their accreditation and other submissions to professional oversight. But there is another side: the creation of another group of former colleagues who are now abjected from the main body. In "Culture as Disability," McDermott and Varenne (1995) frame the creation of culture as people "hammering each other into shape with the well-

structured tools already available." Where the line is drawn that defines who is professional, and who is not, effectively limits the hammers available, thereby defining the parameters of the culture of practice. The story of medicine teaches us that professionalization is the thin edge of a wedge that ends with the dismissal of any unsanctioned practice, and simple "what works" thinking blotting out all other tradition, wisdom, or experience. Delpit (2006) taught us that the rules of the culture of power are most invisible to those who hold it. Professionalization strengthens those who draw the lines, and ensures the continued development of their understandings, but immolates those who are outside and terminates their growth, or relegates them to peripheral status. It is mainly about border patrol.

Rugg

This, then, is the culture my students are preparing to enter. I have to wonder how the boundaries of our profession were differently drawn in the 1920s and 1930s, when Harold Rugg and his Teachers College colleagues confidently laid the groundwork of progressive education through their sweeping schemes of social melioration. Evans book describes in detail Rugg's creation of the first social studies textbook series – a curriculum that sought the synthesis of disparate social disciplines toward situated inquiry into contemporary questions. Such curriculum would necessarily involve critical examination of American free enterprise; those elements drew the ire first of the American Legion, then the National Association of Manufacturers, and resulted in a years-long battle of a thousand cuts across school board meetings and op-ed pages over whether or not such questions were to be asked in school. The drama of the Rugg textbook struggle reads like slow-motion train wreck. It put him in an automatic cycle of attack-and-defend - for *years* – that was ended only by the War pushing it off the front page. The legacy of this battle determined the course of the rest of his career; he never

wrote another series, content to retread foundations methods books for grad students and

undertake a sweeping creativity study, left unfinished upon his death.

I spent time with the 1995 movie *Clueless* in tandem with my Rugg reading – both

because that movie is part of my own originary nostalgia, appearing as it did in the first years of

my teaching career, but also because that adjective kept coming to mind as I tried to understand

Rugg's response to the gathering storm against him. It is not that he did not mount a defense. He

did: an organized and passionate defense, which marshaled not only his considerable personal

energy and articulateness but also that of his professional organization and his well-placed

colleagues and protégés across the country. But he seemed oblivious to how his oratory was fuel

for the fire. Time and again board meetings devolve from debate into *ad hominem* shouting

matches, as his indiscreet public and private utterances found their way into the press and the

ears of his enemies.

It seems he was a big target. His ego was huge – deservedly so, it is mentioned, but

Evans paints a driven and proud man. I feel for him tactically. "J'attaque!" seemed always to be

his gambit, even when his flanks were faltering. I keep wondering what would have been the

outcome if Rugg had picked his encounters better, maybe played the news cycle more

deliberately and given his attackers enough rope to hang themselves – all the subtleties of

character assassination so well known to any 21st century media consumer.

Was this eagerness to engage head-on part of the progressive energy of the moment?

Maybe I am responding to a generational difference in the way such things were settled; in the

era of the Scopes Trial, perhaps fiery rhetoric was the only way public debates were handled. But

we should also note that in the high modern moment of the emerging technocracy, the solution to

insoluble problems was more sweeping vision and better plans. Social problems would be

ameliorated, as Donald Fagen notes, with "just machines to make big decisions / programmed by fellows with compassion and vision." Thus prepared, one met one's opponents head-on with faith that the better idea will win out; that planned-for consequences will materialize as under-theorized oppositions melt away before one's airtight schematics. But the air gets in, and results are unanticipated. Rugg's response to that slip was to pour more fuel on the fire. As a result, he burned out.

Taubman

My attempt to read Rugg's experience is even more revealing in the context of Taubman's perceptive analysis. He explains educators' willingness to submit to incursions of business models of audit and sanction as symptoms of our fear of chaos, the shame that grows from public depictions of our failures and our resulting fantasies of grandiosity, and our unresolved mourning for the failures of the lost ideals of our predecessors (p. 128). Here I find resonance with Rugg's experience, for here is another narrative of the violation of boundaries leading to professional despair. Taubman's work shows how vulnerable educators are *en masse* to provocation; it suggests that our lability is borne not only of individual personality, but from the nature of the role society has framed for us to inhabit. The role of educator comes with the shame baked in, and where shame lives, anger and reactivity will follow.

Taubman also names a kind of burnout when he describes the hopelessness he feels as an Assistant Dean after years of compliance with NCATE regulations. "I was fully aware of how complicit I had been," he notes; "I simply offered faculty a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down" (p. 198). His realization of the pervasiveness of hegemonic audit culture leads him to conclude, after Zizek, that "the modest, local, practical action" he had engaged in served ultimately only as "activity…that masked the Nothingness of what goes on," and that the

only refusal that could make a change was in fact "a refusal to engage in any form of resistance that might help the system to perpetuate itself" (p. 200). Where Rugg's exhaustion drives him to rejoin the battle head-on, *ad infinitum*, Taubman's leads to a decision first to recuse himself completely from the effort lest his opposition be co-opted, then to a decision to attempt "a decathecting from the answers and certainty offered by both the educational establishment and its critics" (p. 201). In this new position all alternatives are offered tentatively – a radical tentativeness, we might call it, the place where the pedagogue's irresistible drive to work for something better is tempered by the complete usurpation of one's field of influence.

Cageyness

I find myself between these two narratives of struggle from two exhausted curriculum workers – both affecting and personal, both offering examples of responses to the social and cultural forces that seek to overwhelm curricular priorities with bureaucratic and nationalistic ones. I read them together and come away challenged by the way nostalgia is foreshortened by the similarities of their situation to my own, but also by the mandate to act, Zizek notwithstanding. Class is always about to start. The question is always: what, then, shall we teach?

The question comes to hand against the backdrop of Goffman's (1961) formulation of "role distance," in which he explicates how every interface between an individual and a role offers space for expression of one's relationship to that role, even while fulfilling it. He gives the example of riding a merry-go-round: young children hang on to their parents in terror, age-appropriate riders giddy-up their horses enthusiastically, and older children jump between horses while rolling their eyes at how silly it all seems. Each has a meta-engagement with the role of

"merry-go-round rider" even while fulfilling it, an engagement that evolves as influenced by dozens of factors.

Role distance informs my Taubmanesquely tentative efforts toward an alternative to the engagements of "cluelessness" and "complicity": that of "cageyness." "Cagey," it turns out, is a very funny word. It has a definition – "not forthcoming, reticent, wary, noncommittal" in the OED; "hesitant, clever, reluctant to give information owing to caution or suspicion" in Merriam's. Its earliest mention is 1909, but no etymology is known. This free-floating signifier offers me a chance to create my own.

To begin: "cageyness" implies cages - structures and frames. If we suppose an origin in boxing or wrestling (as I had assumed), then we can see a cage is something that limits what we can see and react to; it limits what we can do tactically. But the limits of the ring also heighten our awareness and sensitivity as we enter it, making us either more conservative or more aggressive as we seek to exploit those limits toward our goal.

I wonder what it would be to teach a disposition of "cageyness" toward the role they are about to inhabit to foundations students. Such teaching would be boundary work as well, but would involve the maintenance of personal rather than professional boundaries: the cultivation of an attitude of engagement that is cautious and discerning regarding what aspects of a role to take up and what, perhaps, to hold at a distance. As compared to the professionalism narrative, we see that cageyness also stems from self-interest – but a self-interest dedicated somehow to individual self-preservation, to maintenance of distance from role that empowers one as subject, not object; actor, not functionary. Such boundary work welcomes interface with other viewpoints. It respects polyvocality rather than holding antagonism toward it, for other inputs do not threaten its integrity. The "caution" and "suspicion" suggested by "cageyness" need not be cynical;

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conservatism, after all, also means a holding-on to that which one needs when confronted with a force that might seek to take it. It is a perfectly rational stance to hold on to one's resources before the threat of their being "used up."

I hope to cultivate these dispositional outcomes in my students this year though four week-long joint research projects into contemporary aspects of the educational landscape: the rise of neighborhood schools in Wake County, North Carolina; the popular acceptance of the rhetoric of high-stakes testing; the policy impact of the Race to the Top competition; and the "professionalization" of teaching. As we engage each topic we will foreground metacognitive work on *how* we are thinking about each, accompanied by discussion of what unspoken assumptions about teacher role are made in each debate. The goal will be to have developed a parallel conversation about *the teacher role itself* as it interpolates with each policy question, toward a "cleverness" that views oneself always as potential actor even when one is being regarded merely as executor of another's, possibly tacit, expectations.

Perhaps this first articulation of a disposition of "cageyness" is most useful because the act of definition always calls into relief its opposing qualities. What, then, is not "cagey"? Insensitivity to context, a rash forthcomingness and rush to commitment, impulsivity, and a willingness to disclose all one knows without thought to consequences. I wish my students safety and sustenance, above all, and these are the "uncagey" attributes that are both borne of the optimism my students bring and likely to undermine their well-being, especially in their first years of practice. The attributes that brought them to this work can set them up for the disappointment and disillusionment that comes from uncritical, unboundaried self-investment in projects that end up yielding scant reward. An uncritical wide-eyed credulousness is exactly the disposition that will expose them to the experiences that lead to burnout and cynicism. They say

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youth and enthusiasm is no match for age and treachery; I wonder if youth, enthusiasm, and cageyness might be.

Conclusions

This does not strike me as a cynical proposal. What *is* cynical is accounting for burnout when we do the sums, and assuming it is an inextricable part of our vocation's landscape. To revisit my med school experience: cynicism is permitting medical students to go to go their internships and residencies unprepared for the exploitative cultures that await them "on the wards"; to send them into the field without the capacity or permission to maintain a distance between what the role asks of them and what they are capable of. It is creating conditions for them to enter their own fugue states of constant "j'attaque" and preventable overwhelm. It is far better to help them develop cagey dispositions of maintaining distance from the role and reflecting upon it. Better to prepare them to be actors in their vocations, not resources to be used up. And as with the doctors, so with the preservice teachers, as they are entering a vocation even more saturated by expectation. Nostalgia for the intentions of our forbearers and elders brings with it a mandate to learn from their experience of the disconnect between intention and outcome. Preparing our students for the milieu they will enter means strengthening their personal boundaries and developing their capacity, thereby, to act.

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